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SUBJECT: OVP TRIUMPHS, SPO FALTERS IN LOWER AUSTRIAN ELECTIONS

REF: VIENNA 315

¶1. In Lower Austria's March 9 provincial elections (reftel), the center-right OVP, led by the popular Governor Erwin Proell, marginally enhanced its absolute majority in the province, while the center-left SPO, OVP's coalition partner at the national level, suffered major losses. The far-right FPÖ more than doubled its share, overtaking the Greens, who landed in fourth place.

¶2. Voter turnout in the province was 73.1 percent, up from 71.8 percent in the 2003 Lower Austrian election. Preliminary results indicate the following party-by-party vote tallies:

-- OVP: 54.3 percent, up from 53.3 percent in 2003.

-- SPO: 25.6 percent, down from 33.6 percent in 2003.

-- FPÖ: 10.5 percent, up from 4.5 percent in 2003.

-- Greens: 6.8 percent, down from 7.2 percent in 2003.

Comment

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¶3. The elections in Lower Austria revolved around the popular longtime governor Proell, who fully benefited from the status of incumbent. Proell had successfully distanced himself from scandals at the national level largely involving allegations against OVP Interior Ministry officials, as well as from the constant bickering between SPO and OVP in the federal coalition government. The SPO's weakness in the province came as no surprise, particularly given the inability of the bland SPO top candidate, Deputy Governor Heidemaria Onodi, to gain profile vis-à-vis Proell. However, the extent of the party's slippage went even beyond expectations. Despite calls from some conservatives, we assess the Lower Austrian ballot as unlikely to encourage OVP or SPO to call early elections at the national level this spring. The results are attributed mostly to provincial politics, rather than a nationwide shift in the electorate. Kilner